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Jewish Separatism and Human
Progress."

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

NEW WEST END SYNAGOGUE,

St. Petersburg Place, London, W.

ON

SUNDAY, APRIL 24th, 1910,

First day of Passover, 5670,

BY THE

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MINISTER OF THE CONGREGATION.

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Jewish Separatism and Human Progress.

מה העבודה הזאת לכם:

*“What mean ye by this service?”—Exodus XII. 26 b.**

What mean ye by this bondage? So the word may be rendered. So it has been rendered. So it is being rendered and so the law-giver knew the question would be asked, concerning Israel's laws—not by strangers only, but by sons of Israel, too.

(The elders of Israel were gathered around their leader on the banks of the Nile, when he warned them that the question would hereafter be asked of and by their descendants. And, say our sages, on that day Israel heard good news and bad at once. Good news, in the promise of posterity that the warning implied; bad news in the warning itself, that their descendants would forget the Torah. בשורה רעה נתבשרו ישראל באותה שעה שסוף עתידה תורה להשתכח וי'א בשורה טובה נתבשרו לראות בנים ובני בנים.

* Bracketed portions were omitted in delivery.

They had seen their leader, Moses,—whose power was in his person, whose imperious word had broken Egypt's pride,—firm and unyielding before the Pharaoh on his throne. They had seen him unmoved by their own murmurs and threats when they doubted both him and his mission. Their deliverance was yet to come. But now they felt it sure. So sure, that although not yet experienced it had already become as a memory. Moses bade them hold the memory dear unto their farthest generation. Unto their farthest generation! What visions of growing glory and enduring fame the words aroused! But lo, the face of their majestic leader grew o'ercast even as their own enthusiasm rose high. He *lived* in the future of which his confidence made them *dream*. He saw the generations arise unconscious of a constant Revelation in Israel and asking, What mean ye by this service? In the moment of his fear some followers fell away from him. A remnant only went forward to freedom. ויקור העם וישתחוו לפי שנאמר וחמושים עלו בני ישראל אחד מחמשה וי'א אחד מחמשים וכו'

So it has ever continued to be. When Jewish separatism is questioned, Judaism suffers; and with it suffers the cause of Freedom and human progress too, which this Passover festival celebrates.)

What mean ye by this service? The service is the Seder Service of Passover. It commemorates the beginning of Israel's unity. It gathers the members of Jewish families, and cements their bond of family love, the band that binds

them together and winds itself back through the ages to the time when the families of Israel were welded into that union which gave to the world wealth, as inestimable as it is intangible, as real as it is unseen, as imperishable as it is universal, the wealth of spiritual insight into the meaning of life, the unfailing source of our noble impulses, the goal of our true endeavours, the purpose of God, the freedom of man.

What mean ye by this service? We mean that in this celebration we gather together and call to mind that Israel came to proclaim to the world true freedom in true service. In this *זמן חרותנו* we declare our conviction that to this day our continued existence makes for the increase of human freedom; that the sacrifices we bring as Jews, and the pains which our loyalty to Judaism involves in a world which is not Jewish, must bear fruit in the progress of human freedom, by compelling the freedom which our loyalty demands.

What mean ye by this service? We mean that we are conscious that in exact proportion with our loyalty to our people and faith, is our service to mankind.

What greater tragedy, then, can there be, than that of the Jew who with three thousand years of history embodied in his being, seeks to stand before the world as nothing more than modernist, asking his neighbour to forget that he has journeyed along one main stream, that his way can be traced beyond the beginnings of our civilisation, and desiring to be regarded as one who has just turned some corner with some rivulet of human history? But, whatever be the attitude of individual Jews, a people whose character

has been moulded by three thousand years of maintained individuality, is not to be lightly washed away. And if any one of you consciously refuse the effort to maintain that individuality, it is surely hard to believe that you are not thereby proclaiming a weakness of character in the very justifications which you put forward for your laxity in Jewish observances.

I plead with you this day for sacrifice of convenience to the practice of our traditional Judaism, with no other justification than the conscious purpose of maintaining the separateness of the Jew.

What mean ye by this service? We mean that we know, that our Jewish existence proves, that despite our unwillingness to acknowledge our rôle, despite our inability to recognise it, despite even those Jews, who, as some of our congregants have told me of themselves, do not desire to contaminate themselves by association with their fellow Jews, despite the cowardice that bids us try to forget that Judaism is not merely a sect among religious sects whose differences are in heaven, despite the cowardice that bids us traverse our short distances with nicely calculated measured steps to the tune of whatever may set the pace and give direction to the march of events in our day,—our Jewish existence proves that even despite ourselves Judaism is for us a distinct path, a single course, a particular direction in life. Whether we will it or not, whether we know it or no, we follow that path; and the singleness of Israel's course remains a steadying influence in a world of change.

Perhaps the saddest danger signal in our midst, far sadder even than the neglect of Jewish observances, is the

neglect of Jewish learning. Not only do we weaken our Jewish associations, but our minds are fed in a non-Jewish world from non-Jewish sources, and Jewish preachers are entreated not to weary their hearers with the sayings of Jewish teachers, but to concern themselves with the living problems of the day.

“What mean ye by this service”? How apposite the question seems at many a modern seder service? How strange it must seem to many an Occidental Jew to find himself suddenly transferred as if by magic to a placid Oriental world, wandering from the banks of the Nile, himself an actor in the drama of Israel’s deliverance, on to the schools of Palestine repeating the quaint sayings of the Rabbis, on through the vaults of trembling marranos to the Ghettos of our day; with child-like faith expressed in simple song, hovering over all.

It is as if we descend, for a while, in air-tight vessels of religious ceremonial from off the surface of life’s rushing waters, down to the very bottom of Time’s ocean, to glide in and out among the foundered vessels, which some of us think once bore our ancestors o’er life’s surging waves. But lo, the wrecks around us are not of the ships that bore our ancestors! We descended to the bottom of Time’s ocean, Yes! But we did not leave the ship that bears us now in order that we might do it. There are Egyptian, Persian, Grecian, Roman wrecks galore around us. Time’s ocean grown in volume did o’erwhelm them. Our ship grew with it, deck o’er deck, and our descent was but within the self-same wondrous vessel. There are Jews, no doubt, in the foundered wrecks around us at the bottom of

Time's ocean ; sectarian Jews of all kinds, of all times, who in their day had asked : What mean ye by this service ? Our Hagada of the Passover Seder Service, denounces the son who asks that question. He places himself outside of our vessel. He rejects his part in Israel's deliverance. The dark waters overwhelm him !

What mean ye by this service ? Only this ! That our course on life's surface is controlled from the calm deep depths down below : That a people whose history reaches so deep down and whose ideals do constantly uplift it, is not to be moved from its course by gathering storms : That whatever the life you individually lead on Life's surface, there is a constant, subtle influence, which even when Jew and Judaism are farthest from your minds, yet tends to keep you on our people's course.

The impulse is unceasing, which, from the first, has marked out Israel's course. That is, no doubt, what the olden Rabbis, whom we regard so slightly and whose words we so little understand, meant to impress on us when they said that throughout the forty years of Israel's wandering in the Wilderness, no day passed without a north wind blew at midnight. (כל אותן ארבעים שנה שהיו ישראל במדבר לא היה יום שלא נשבה רוח צפונית בחצי הלילה).

There is a subtle influence, which when in recurring darknesses Israel threatened to lose its way, has always taken Israel captive and set it on its course again.

The Passover Seder Service ends with the hope "next

year in Jerusalem." And you come to life's surface, wondering what there is in your life in common with that hope. Your direction is not that way? Oh, yes it is! I am a fatalist in my faith in Israel's destiny. I laugh to scorn the fears and hopes of those within and without our camp, who proclaim that Judaism is destined to disappear with the Jew. That may be. But the Jew will not disappear, because God does speak to the world through the Jew to-day even as he did in the days of old, when through Israel the Deliverance we celebrate to-day, was made the goal of all human endeavour, and the Deliverer to whom we pray proclaimed Himself Deliverer to every soul in every day.

The persistent loyalty of the Jew since that day is a constant uplifting of the banner of freedom; and who will set limits to the influence of that constancy in compelling the liberty which it demands? When doubt at times overtakes me and in moments of gloom I ask myself if after all we are not in very truth the mere playthings of chance, whenever I feel prone to question the existence of an all-wise Steersman at the helm of the Universe, I ask myself how comes it that despite the individual Jew, the power inherent in the truth of our religious heritage makes the Jewish people to this day the means whereby that Truth, which is the Seal of God, impresses itself ever more deeply on the soul of man? Were Jews consciously missionary I might lose my faith in God. The bill posted up on the church over the way, announcing that thirty Jewish children will sing in the choir at a Christian missionary service to Jews, tells me that missionary success is man's success, not God's. Our

prophets proclaimed the brotherhood of man, with the sword of foemen dangling o'er their heads ; and we do not strive for God against man. Nay, not only do we drive no missions, we have to lament Jewish laxity, the weakness of the loyalty of our own brethren to Judaism. And yet, despite ourselves the cause of freedom remains to-day the cause of the Jew.

God revealed himself in Israel as Deliverer, and in the Jew he so proclaims himself to-day. Else, how comes it, pray, that Turkey to-day publicly proclaims the part Jews played in its bloodless revolution ? How comes it that, as a writer in "The Jewish Review" so well expresses it, in Russia to-day, to strike at liberty is to strike at the Jew ? Aye, even though Jews themselves are ignorant of and deny the part they play ! How comes it that not the movements which make for national glories and drive nations asunder, but just those great influences that help to bring nations closer, are the works of men born among our separatist Jews ? Civilisation is said to progress with increasing means of communication, and Jews, it is true, have played no great part in furthering that material civilisation which makes for increased communication and physical comfort in life. But, do railroads and steamboats promote the peace of the world ? They may throw men against one another, as well as bring them together. The peace of the world is dependant on the intellectual intercourse that increases understanding.

The part that Jews have played in the material progress of civilisation may be small, but who will deny the great part of the Jew in promoting the intellectual intercourse of

nations ? A persecuting world confined Jews to commerce. The Jew returned good for evil, a blessing for a curse. For what does not the peace of the world owe to-day to that closeness of international relations which commerce promotes ? And how much of that closeness of relations can be retraced to the Jewish invention of the Bill of Exchange ? How comes it, pray, that the very peace movement originated in the minds of the sons of our separatist Jews ? How comes it that the most successful effort to break down the barriers created between man and man by our babel of national tongues, ideal and impracticable though the effort may seem to be, is the work of the genius of a Polish Jew ?

What mean ye by this service ? The answer which Moses bade us give is the one which alone can still be given to this question. **פסח** Passover. The Angel of Death has passed over and passes over Israel. Israel **ישראל**. The very name doth proclaim that in us still God strives !

What mean ye by this bondage to your peculiar laws ? What mean ye by your separatism ? We mean thereby to remain the means whereby is made manifest God's Revelation in human progress towards ever greater freedom. Be this the inspiration of this **זמן חרותנו** of our celebration of Freedom in God's service ; to send us determined to maintain the traditions of our people, all that maintains our separatism, our international religious nationality, through which God strives to bring nations ever closer. That faith may seem arrogant. Cowardice alone can reject it in face of life's evidence, the cowardice that would reject with it the duties of self-sacrifice which it imposes on us, that by our loyalty we may compel the

freedom it demands. I appeal to you individually to put forth all the power that is yours, by your loyalty to our traditions to strengthen the bonds that unite us, and so win the confidence that we are each and all in the hands of the all-wise Steersman at the helm, our heavenly Father, God, who strives in us for all.

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